

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 8, 2010

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Gary Locke
Secretary, U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Vilsack, Secretary Salazar, and Secretary Locke:

We are writing to you today to request your immediate and coordinated attention to address a crisis of historic magnitude emerging in the Oregon/California Klamath Basin. Put simply, the Klamath Lake that supplies water to the farmers and the river is at its lowest level since measurements began in the 1970s. Its current level is significantly below where it was in 1992 – the worst drought year ever in the Klamath Basin.

The drought currently facing the Klamath Basin would deal a devastating blow to farmers, Klamath Basin Tribes and fishermen, as well as to the salmon and other species in the Klamath River. Nothing short of an unprecedented, integrated and expansive set of responses is required.

As you well know, the Klamath Basin in northern California and southern Oregon contains approximately 1,400 family farms and ranches that encompass over 200,000 acres of farmland irrigated with water from the Klamath Lake and River. The Klamath Basin's agricultural industry provided over \$440 million in revenue to the community in 2009. In addition, the Klamath Basin is considered a "Western Everglades" attracting nearly 80 percent of the Pacific Flyway's waterfowl and supporting the largest over-wintering population of bald eagles in the lower 48 states. It is also one of the most productive salmon river systems in the country.

Because of significant below-normal winter precipitation, the lake is currently two feet below the minimum refill targets in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's biological opinion. For context, we note that this level is roughly one foot below the water level at this time in 1992, the worst drought year on record. Consequently, there is very little chance Klamath irrigators will receive needed irrigation water either on time or at all. With spring planting season upon us, it is critical that options be examined now to allow solutions to be presented within the next several weeks.

We ask that your departments review every conceivable option to address the water shortage and provide relief to farmers. We believe federal agencies should consider, at a minimum:

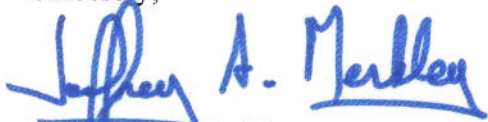
- Providing funds to purchase upstream water rights voluntarily offered;
- Adjusting surface water management within parameters of the law and sound science;
- Releasing emergency funds for land idling through water banks or other programs;
- Activating emergency drought wells or other means of accessing groundwater; and
- Establishing drought assistance for all farmers regardless of crop type.

We believe that no single action will adequately address the projected water shortfall caused by this year's drought. For example, it is our understanding that drought wells cover no more than 20 percent of the irrigated farm land in the Basin. Swift, decisive and coordinated action is needed to provide an integrated set of solutions before the planting season begins in the next several weeks. We certainly do not want to put farmers in a situation where they need to plant their crops and then subsequently let them fail in order for the farmers to be eligible for drought assistance.

Farmers, Klamath Basin Tribes, fishermen and the resources in the Basin need a comprehensive set of options and a plan from their federal partners to address this crisis quickly. We ask you to appoint high level contacts in each agency with decision-making authority who can collaborate with our offices and the Governor in moving forward with a plan to save the Basin from this impending crisis. We are committed to assisting and providing the leadership necessary to bringing the federal, state and local resources to bear on this situation.

We urge swift, prompt and coordinated actions to address this historic drought.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeff A. Merkley".

Senator Jeff Merkley
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ron Wyden".

Senator Ron Wyden
United States Senator